Foreword

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A fascinating field and a pragmatic enterprise

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Information science is a fascinating field. It is basically about helping people find the books, articles, pictures, music, information, etc., they need or would like to read or experience. Information specialists help students, researchers and everybody else to find the documents they need in order to solve tasks, including writing thesis and research papers. Such documents used to be kept in physical libraries, archives and museums but are increasingly available in digital form, sometimes free, sometimes with toll access. We may term all this 'the information ecology' and information specialists are those people studying this universe in order to help people utilizing it optimally for the specific purposes that people have.

Although much information is available in digital form, the study of information is not identical with the study of computers, information technology or communication technology. Information science is rather about knowledge production in society and how this knowledge is materialized in documents, including digital documents, and how it is organized, labelled and managed, in order to serve different groups and individuals (this definition is adapted from Jack Andersen). Information science is about what Google and Wikipedia can do for you, but it is also about what Google and Wikipedia cannot do for you, what else needs to be consulted. It is about how to improve access to information by progress both in computer-based retrieval and in forms of information services provided by information professionals. Such information services include the teaching of 'information literacy' to students and helping professionals, for

example medical doctors, doing evidence-based practice. Another way to describe the difference between computer science and information science is to say that for the first the interaction between humans and computers is a core topic. In the case of information science it is rather the interaction between people and the whole information ecology. This makes an important difference, although the computer is certainly a central tool in information science.

Information science has many specific branches. Some specialize in specific technologies, for example, the new wave of 'social technologies' or specific user groups (e.g. library and information services for children). Some subfields cover kinds of processes such as information seeking and retrieval or knowledge organization and information architecture. Some specialize in specific domains, for example cultural, social or scientific information. All these branches are not just studied by information professionals, but are interdisciplinary by nature. That means that also information science itself is at the same time a monodiscipline in its own right and an interdisciplinary enterprise drawing from other fields and depending on input from other fields. The unique focus of information science in relation to other disciplines is described above: the study of the information ecology in order to facilitate its utilization to many specific purposes. It follows that information science is a pragmatic enterprise: it studies knowledge and information for a purpose, in order to make progress and to improve things (well aware that 'progress' and 'improvement' may mean different things to different people).

What is important and critical for the further development of information science at the present time? I believe this has to do with on the one hand the need *to develop a general perspective* that keeps the field together and helps information scientists and information professionals to get a clear identity in relation to other fields in this multidisciplinary field; first of all, perhaps, in relation to computer scientists. On the other hand it is necessary to *develop a body of specific information science knowledge related to all major branches of knowledge*. Knowledge and information is always specific, it is always about something concrete (including, of course, concrete philosophical questions). There are obvious limits to a pure generalist or universalist approach. Therefore more domain-analytic studies are also urgently needed.

The writing of textbooks has generally low prestige in the academic world. I believe this is unjust, at least in some fields. Most information specialists only know a narrow part of the field, lacking an understanding of information science as a whole. It is important both in the educational context and in the scientific and professional context that we have a clear identity: that we can understand and argue why the different subfields exist, and all contribute to strengthen the whole field from their own corner. Strong parts and a strong whole are mutually dependent. Therefore it is important to work on the whole, by writing textbooks,

by studying the history and theories of the field and in other ways. To write textbooks in highly fragmented fields is a challenge, and unfortunately many textbooks provide very narrow and one-sided views of information science.

I believe this book is the best introduction to information science available at present. It tackles both the philosophical basis and the most important branches, and it is based on solid knowledge about the contemporary literature of the field. If students have the knowledge provided by this introduction, this would be a fine basis on which to go further with specific problems.

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David Bawden and Lyn Robinson

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